

## HIMALAYAN FRONTIERS OF INDIA: SOME PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper gives an overview of Himalayan geopolitics or neighbouring countries. Himalayas has been viewed as a defence shield by both India and China. The paper proposes the need for removing the existing bottlenecks in road, rail and communication linkages between the mainland of India and its Himalayan frontier outposts and even beyond, in order to turn the entire frontier belt into a bridge of friendship and cooperation.*

**Keywords:** Baltistan, Ganga, Geo-strategy, Himalaya, Kailash, Kargil, Ladakh, Tibet, Mansarovar, Xinjiang.

### INTRODUCTION

The Himalaya is the embodiment of divinity, of nature in its splendor and of culture in the deepest sense of the word. The Himalaya has been inextricably interwoven with the life and culture of India since time immemorial. It has been the repository of rich biodiversity, source of main river systems and glaciers and the symbol of India's spiritual and national consciousness. The geographical feature which dominates India most is the Himalayas, which has acted as a great natural frontier. Though geographically speaking Himalaya is embraced at its western and eastern extremities by the Indus and Brahmaputra respectively, we can't isolate the Hindu Kush, Karakoram and Pamir region, which is continuous and interlocked with the great Himalayan mountain system. Stretching over a length of over 2,500 kms. in India from Kashmir in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east, the Himalayas have provided India with the natural and most formidable line of defence. However, the imposing geographical features of the Himalaya did not prevent this region from being a complex of cultural interaction, movement of races, overland trade and communication. The Himalayan region involves wide diversity of cultural patterns, languages, races and religious practices. Yet it has numerous common features like geographical contiguity, ecological adaptation based on uniform environmental features and a distinct pattern of hill economy. The Himalayan region has been the cradle from where ancient Indian culture including Mahayana Buddhism spread to different countries in Central, Southeast and East Asia. Such cross-cultural contacts were not confined only to religious philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism; these also included art, architecture, literature etc. Such movement produced a harmonious blend of cultures, arts, science and literatures. After the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Indian Himalaya became the last refuge of Buddhism. That explains the rationale behind the setting up of specialised Buddhist Studies Institutes in Ladakh, Gangtok and Arunachal Pradesh after late 1950s.

The importance of Himalaya as the natural frontier of India in the north is immersed in Indian ethos and psyche.

अस्त्यु उत्तरस्यां दिशि देवतात्मा हिमालयो नाम नगाधिराजः। पूर्वापरौ तोयनिधि विगाह्य स्थितः पृथिव्या इव मानदण्डः ॥ 1.1 ॥

(In the north (of our country) stands the Lord of Mountains and the very embodiment of divinity-the Himalaya. Like a measuring rod of the earth spanning the eastern and western oceans.)

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This is how Kalidas in his *Kumārasambhava* described the Himalaya as *devatma* a divine personality, and as the measuring rod spanning the eastern and western oceans, thereby pinpointing the northern frontiers of India. To the majority of Indians, Himalayas are mythical mountains referred to by the Vedas, Puranas and other scriptures. Himalaya is part of our history, tradition and cultural heritage. Most of our sacred shrines and places of pilgrimages are situated in the Himalayan heights. So much so, there is no fulfillment of life to an Indian without some sort of a Himalayan experience.

The very fact that boundaries of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, India and Myanmar converge along the Himalayas, lends a unique geo-strategic importance to this region. Its potential for instability and conflict is furthered by the ethnic-religious jigsaw prevailing in the Himalayas and trans-Himalayas where people of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic faiths are concentrated in various areas and are vulnerable to extraneous influences. Major international land frontier disputes pertain to this area. Whereas India and Pakistan have been locked in a conflict over Kashmir since 1947, the Sino-Indian border dispute remains to be settled. Any cross-border fraternisation of people of Xinjiang and Tibet in China, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indian Himalayas from Kashmir upto North East, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, on ethnic and religious lines is a potential source of conflict in the region and a threat to the security of concerned states. With the disintegration of erstwhile USSR and the emergence of newly independent Central Asian states - all having predominantly Muslim population, a new geopolitical situation has arisen across the north-western Himalayas. Due to its geo-strategic proximity to South Asia and West Asia, Central Asia has emerged as a distinct geopolitical entity stimulating global attention and interest. The Central Asian Republics are in transition passing through an important phase of emerging and transforming into a new, social, political and economic order. All these Republics are engaged in building new national identities forming new patterns of alliances and associations and finding their place in the changed situation. The rise of Taliban to power in Kabul in September 1996, which turned Afghanistan into the centre of Islamist extremism, global terrorism, drugs and arms trafficking, brought the region into the focus of global attention. Establishment of an extremist Islamist order in Afghanistan and the active involvement of Islamist Afghan *Mujahedeen* in cross-border terrorism and  *Jihad* (Holy war), whether in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, Tajikistan or some other CIS countries, adversely affected regional security, peace and stability in the Himalayan and adjoining Central Asian region.

Though the Taliban, Osama bin Laden and his network were actively engaged in fanning Islamist extremism and terrorism in South Asia, Central Asia, South East Asia and also in the West, it was only after the dreadful terrorist strikes on World Trade Centre and Pentagon on 11 September 2001, that the United States and its western allies realized the severity of challenge posed by bin Laden, Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Even after more years of global campaign against terror, the Taliban and Al Qaeda cadres have not been vanquished. In fact the past two years has witnessed the resurgence of Taliban and Al Qaeda, imposing great challenge to sustainable security and peace in Afghanistan and the adjoining region.

Emergence of radical and extremist Islamist movements in West Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia and lately in South East Asia is the main source of instability and conflict in these regions. The rise of radical Islamic groups has been influenced by the leading ideologues of Islamic fundamentalist thought, Jamal-ud-Din Afghani (1839-1897), Maulana Abul Ali Mawdoodi (1903-79) the first Amir of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, Ayatollah Khomeini (1909-89) leader of the *Islamic Revolutionary Party of Iran*, Hassan-al-Banna and Syed Qutb (1906-66) of the *Muslim Brotherhood* of Egypt. These ideologues advocated  *Jihad* (holy war) against non-Islamic societies and states. They emphasized that political power is indispensable to the establishment of an Islamic state. The concept of  *Dar-el-Islam* and  *Dar-el-Harb* and  *Jihad* (holy war) as advocated by the Islamists envisages a perpetual state of confrontation between Islamic and non-Islamic states. Though Muslims like any other non-Muslim have multiple identities – religious, ethnic, tribal, linguistic or territorial, their emphasis on the Islamic communal identity puts them in collision course with the state and other groups. Islamist intellectuals,  *ulema* and activists have been seeking to blur the distinction between Islam as a religion and nationalism. They prop up the Islamic political consciousness by politicizing already existing religious traditions and practices and by resisting change and modernization. The concept of  *umma* or  *millat* is being invoked to abet, support and legitimize the secessionist movements of Muslims living in non-Muslim states. Syed Ali Shah Gilani of the *Jamaat-e-Islami* of Kashmir and prominent secessionist leader has been unambiguous in his statements declaring that "The Muslims (of Kashmir) were part of  *Millat*.... This very feeling of being part of  *Millat* attracts  *mujahedeen* from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan etc. to Kashmir." ( *Indian Express*, 4 January 2001). Gilani's pan-Islamism which is based on the concept of  *millat/umma* transcending national boundaries is at the root of ongoing violence and turmoil in Kashmir. Gilani and his group are invoking the suzerainty of Muslim  *millat* in repudiation of lawful democratic and secular polity and liberal and composite cultural tradition of  *Kashmiriyat* based on indigenous history, culture and ethos of Kashmir.

Western Himalayas have served as the Gateway to India for numerous invasions and influences from Central Asia and West Asia. Even in contemporary times, India has had to experience successive military aggressions from Pakistan in 1947, 1965, 1971, 1999 (in Kargil) and now in the form of proxy war in Kashmir that has been going on for more than two decades, besides the Chinese military offensive in 1962 from across the Himalayas.

Taking the case of Ladakh, it enjoys a unique geo-strategic location, being bounded by Xinjiang in the north, Tibet in the east, Kashmir and Baltistan in the west, and Lahaul, Spiti, Kulu, Bushahr and Chamba in the south. Ladakh has played an important role in the history and culture of this frontier region. Enjoying a central position in the network of overland caravan routes that were linked to the Silk Route, Ladakh acted as an important gateway in the Indo-Central Asian exchange of men, materials and ideas through the ages. However, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the extent and pattern of these exchanges was influenced on the one hand by the state of diplomatic relations between the three empires – Britain, Russia and China, and on the other hand by the level of influence exercised by the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir. Whereas 1830s witnessed the beginning of Great Game played by Britain and Russia in Central Asia, it was during this period that Ladakh became an object of Dogra expansion. In 1834 Ladakh came under Dogra control, and by 1840 the Dogra forces led by General Zorawar Singh had established their authority throughout Ladakh and Baltistan. In 1846, Ladakh became a part of the newly founded State of Jammu and Kashmir under the Dogra ruler Maharaja Gulab Singh and his successors. And after 1947, Ladakh including Kargil has been a province of Jammu and Kashmir State, with its borders abutting Xinjiang and Tibet regions of China to its north and east, and Baltistan in Pak-occupied Kashmir to its west.

Since a sizeable portion of Ladakh territory (Baltistan, Raskam, Aksai Chin) has been under the occupation of Pakistan and China after 1947-48, this remains an important issue of study and research by Indian scholars. It may be pointed out that the old established frontiers on the Tibet-Ladakh border were reaffirmed by the Peace Treaty signed between the Dogras and Tibetans in September 1842. The Tibetans also accepted the Dogras as the legitimate authority in Ladakh, and trade in shawl-wool and tea was continued in accordance with old customs via Ladakh. Similarly, Baltistan (Skardo) which was later occupied by Pak forces in 1947-48 and has ever since been part of Pak-occupied Kashmir/Northern Areas, remained part and parcel of Ladakh division of Jammu and Kashmir State under the Dogras. However, Lahaul and Spiti which were part of Raja Gulab Singh's territory of Ladakh were taken away by the British in 1846-47, and merged with the British possessions of Kangra in the Western Himalayas. Ladakh's distinct geo-cultural identity was consolidated by the Dogras who maintained a separate *Wazarat* for Ladakh and Baltistan.

The Dogra rulers followed a pro-active policy towards Central Asia, as they despatched several secret missions to Yarkand, Kashgar etc. through Ladakh to maintain friendly contacts with the neighbouring Central Asian chiefs and also to acquire political intelligence about the rapidly changing course of events in Central Asia. Indo-Central Asian trade was developed through Ladakh, as the Srinagar-Leh-Yarkand trade route was declared a Treaty Road in 1870 through an agreement concluded between Maharaja Ranbir Singh and the British. No duties on goods bound for Central Asia were levied on this route. Besides, two Joint Commissioners, one British and the other being the Maharaja's officer resident at Leh, were supervising the conduct of the Indo-Central Asian trade through Ladakh.

Ladakh maintained social, cultural and economic linkages with Western Tibet and also with the neighbouring principalities of Lahaul, Spiti, Kulu and Bushahr. The history of Ladakh's control over Gartok and Rudok in Western Tibet is a matter of importance. Minsar – an enclave of Dogras within Western Tibet used to pay revenue to the Dogras till early twentieth century. The British used Ladakh and adjoining areas in Gilgit, Skardo, Hunza and Chitral as '*frontier listening posts*' to monitor the developments in Central Asia and Xinjiang throughout the Dogra period.

Issues like Pakistan's aggression in Ladakh and Baltistan in 1947-48, the heroic resistance by Ladakhis, repulsion of Pak invasion, and also the circumstances leading to non-recovery of Baltistan/Skardo from the Pak control, became even more relevant during the Pakistani intrusion in Kargil in 1999 which further underscored the need for effective security management of Indian Himalayan frontiers. The Kargil crisis unleashed latent nationalism and fierce patriotism throughout India cutting across regional, religious and caste barriers. It also showed that how the people of India demonstrated exemplary courage, deep rooted sense of national unity and commitment to the territorial integrity of India and their resolve and willingness to sacrifice their lives for defending the Himalayan borders of India. It also brought into focus the vulnerability of Indian positions in Kashmir along the Srinagar-Dras-Kargil-Leh strategic highway, due to Pakistan controlling the heights overlooking this highway. It only shows, how unprepared Indian military and foreign office authorities were, at the time of delineating first the CFL in 1949 and later the LOC in 1971-72. Successive political leaders have allowed the battle to be lost at the table even if it was won at the battle front at high human costs.

In early twentieth century, Lord Curzon visualised the Himalayan regions of Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan and north east frontier as an "inner defence line for India protected by a Tibetan buffer region." Later China viewed Himalaya as its outer line of defence necessary for the protection of Chinese interests in Tibet. Some analysts even expressed the view that "To Communist China, the high plateau of Tibet is like the palm of the hand with Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, North East Frontier Agency as five fingers. China has the palm under its control; now it wants the strategic five fingers without which the palm is not very useful."<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the Himalayas as the protective barrier of India is enhanced by the vast expanse of Tibetan plateau, whose elevation is above that of ordinary mountain ranges. In the words of K.M. Pannikar, "the plateau of Tibet has Kuenlun mountains as its boundary in the north, the Karakorum in the west and the south, and the east is equally mountain-bound. The mountainous area north of India has to be considered strategically as one-a great quadrilateral, the middle of which is an elevated plateau of 15,000 feet above sea level, and the southern ramparts, an invulnerable range of an average height of 20,000 feet. The area enclosed is 500,000 square miles, frightening and formidable in its geographical features, an arid waste, wind-swept and waterless where trees do not grow."<sup>2</sup> So in spite of the new and sophisticated advancements of weapon and communication technologies, the traditional importance of Himalayas as the land frontier and natural barrier has not been diminished. As Pannikar emphasises. "The essential point about the Himalayas is not their width of 150 miles, but the plateau behind it, which in itself is an elevation of about 15,000 feet and is guarded on all four sides by high mountains. In fact, the vast barrier upland behind the Himalayas provides the most magnificent defence in depth imaginable."<sup>3</sup>

The Tibet question has remained the focus of international and national attention with India hosting the Tibetan refugees for over four decades now. Whereas India has been generous to the Tibetan refugees providing land for settlement and avenues for their education and sustenance, India has not used their presence or that of the Tibetan Government –in-Exile at Dharamshala, as a bargaining chip in its dealings with China. This is despite the fact that the pro-Tibetan and pro-Western lobbies in India have been active in their sustained campaign impressing upon the Government of India to lend political support to the Tibetans' demand of independence and recognition of Tibetan Government- in -Exile. For the past few years, there has been a noticeable spurt in the involvement of some Buddhists of Indian Himalayas particularly in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh to press for this demand. Several forums such as Himalayan Committee for Action on Tibet, Himalayan Buddhist Cultural Association, Tibet Sangharsh Samiti, etc. have been formed, with their branches operating in all the states of Indian Himalayas. These forums have been pressing upon the Government of India to support Dalai Lama's proposals on Tibet and also to recognise the Tibetan Government –in- Exile headed by Dalai Lama. Besides, demands have been made to include Bhoti language in the VIII schedule of the Indian constitution, and also to provide for preservation and promotion of Tibetan and Himalayan art and culture.

The above mentioned facts need to be viewed in the light of sustained efforts by Tibetan scholars working in Dharamshala or in the west towards preparing a unified system of Tibetan language so that the same script, dialect etc. is applicable to all Tibetan speaking peoples whether in India, Tibet or elsewhere. Some western scholars have even advanced the theory of Shambhala World, advocating unification of non-Chinese, non-Russian and non-Indian races in the Central Asian, Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region. This raises the question of Tibetanisation of society, culture and politics of the Indian Himalayas particularly in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh etc. It has been noticed that Tibetan settlers in these parts do not use local dialects and seek to exercise their cultural superiority over the local Buddhist inhabitants, as they harbour an exalted view of Tibetan culture. Due to divergent modes of economic activity being followed by the Tibetan settlers and the indigenous Buddhists in the Indian Himalayas, the former being engaged in marketing and business activities and the latter being involved in primary agrarian economy, there have been social conflicts between these two culturally similar groups, with the locals viewing the Tibetan settlers as exploiters.

As a Ladakhi Buddhist scholar points out, "the intense Tibetanisation of the Himalayan region over the last two to three decades seems to have served China's interests well. The Dalai Lama has cleverly carved out space for himself through cultural and religious activities along the Himalayan belt from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh. To add to the list of dozens of Tibetan spiritual leaders having a foothold in the Himalayas, China is deliberately exporting more influential lamas into India, the most prominent of them being the Karmapa Lama. The fact that the fifth Dalai Lama was born in Tawang is being added to China's new articulation of its claim over Arunachal Pradesh.... There is no doubt that China's 'West Development Campaign' would enhance the scope for its influence across the Himalayas. The picture is getting increasingly confused along the Sino-Indian frontiers, and it could be that a solution to the Tibet problem would be found only at India's expense."<sup>4</sup>

Hence the need to settle the Sino-Indian border dispute in a manner that takes into account long term strategic and defence requirements of India. Whereas the political frontiers should be defined and delineated, Indian diplomacy and political leadership should ensure that such frontiers are not breached by any overt or covert operations by the enemy.

India and China, being the largest populated countries comprising nearly 40 per cent of the total humanity, are poised to achieve greater heights in their economic, industrial, technological and military prowess in the 21st century. Rich in human and material resources and having a wide diversity of peoples and cultures, both countries share a long history of historico-cultural interface. In the post-cold war era, both India and China can play a constructive role in maintaining peace and security in South and Central Asia, besides enhancing the prospects of bilateral trade, commerce and human development in these two countries.

Both India and China share similar views on major issues, particularly economic development, pursuit of economic, social and cultural rights, threats posed by drugs and arms trafficking, trans-border terrorism, religious extremism and ethnic-religious separatism to the territorial integrity of nation states. Yet, there remain substantial differences on the issues of Sino-Indian boundary and China's military and nuclear assistance to Pakistan, which continue to be a matter of concern in India. Though China claims that the boundary question is a legacy of the British rule in India, the fact remains that China has resolved its similar long standing boundary disputes with Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In these cases too, China had based its claims on the same premise that these border disputes were a legacy of the imperialist Tsars. Therefore, there seems to be no plausible reason as to why the Sino-Indian border issue can not be resolved after mutual negotiations to the satisfaction of both the parties.

It must be noted that China has brooked no outside interference on the question of its territorial integrity and under its 'One China Policy,' Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Taiwan are integral parts of People's Republic of China. China is acutely conscious of the subversive role of Islamist extremists trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan in fuelling the Uyghur Muslim separatist movement in Xinjiang, which accounted for a series of riots, bomb blasts and killings during the year 1998. Riots recurred in February 1999 in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. But it goes to the credit of the Chinese authorities that they took serious view of external support to the Uighur separatists and made Pakistan hand over to them the identified Islamist extremists who are later reported to have been punished by the death squads for their terrorist acts. At the diplomatic level China has seen to it that various countries including the newly independent Muslim Central Asian Republics have committed themselves to this 'One China Policy' and even undertaken not to support or encourage any ethnic-religious separatist movements by Uyghur, within their countries. Applying the same principle, China has since early 1990s shifted its earlier position on Kashmir and recognised bilateralism as the basis of resolving the issue between India and Pakistan. The Chinese Ambassador in India, Zhou Gang's statement in an interview to an Indian newspaper that "India and Pakistan peacefully resolve their differences including the Kashmir issue through talks"<sup>5</sup> only reiterates China's position on Kashmir.

Given these facts and the ongoing process of Sino-Indian dialogue at high official and political levels, following points merit consideration, among other things:

- a) Whereas the Nathu La border trade point in Sikkim has recently been opened, the traditional India-Central Asia overland trade routes via Leh, Yarkand, Kashgar and onwards to the Central Asian Republics, and Leh-Demchok-Gartok-Lhasa can also be considered for similar reopening.
- b) The proposal of Jammu and Kashmir government to open the Leh-Demchok route to Western Tibet as a viable and easier alternative route for pilgrimage to the Kailash-Mansarovar across the LOC in Ladakh be pursued and got accepted by the Chinese side. This will help in reducing the journey time and provide a safer passage to pilgrims. (More than 300 pilgrims had died due to landslides at Malpa in Uttarakhand in October 1998).
- c) There exist the possibilities of opening an oil/gas pipeline linkage across the LOC in Ladakh with the proposed Xinjiang - Kazakhstan pipeline, which needs to be studied.

That the former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in his address to the Combined Commanders' Conference on November 1, 2003 was quite forthright in underlining the need for pragmatic approach by India to finally resolve the Sino-Indian boundary question, is encouraging development. To quote Vajpayee, "our border with China has remained largely peaceful for the past few decades. During my recent visit to China, we agreed to raise our bilateral and economic cooperation to a qualitatively higher level. The decision to appoint special representatives to discuss the boundary question from a political perspective was a particularly significant measure. A final resolution of the boundary question would release considerable military energies and finances for more purposeful activities. It is, therefore, a strategic objective. To

achieve it, we should be willing to take pragmatic decisions."<sup>6</sup> Of late, India has woken up to the need for removing the existing bottlenecks in road, rail and communication linkages between the mainland of India and its Himalayan frontier outposts and even beyond in order to turn the entire frontier belt into a bridge of friendship and cooperation.

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